

Reconciliation

Elizabeth Shove

I plumped up the cushions on the white leather sofa and looked around the flat. It was where I lived but it still didn't really feel like home. There was so little left from before: a small pottery jar that had survived, and a few damaged books. I checked my watch again. Why was I so nervous about a visit from my own son? Alex lived a three-hour drive away from Kiev, but he was coming for lunch and bringing his new girlfriend with him. Everything was ready. I laid the table and rolled the napkins, just like his father used to do. I was expecting it, but even so, the sound of the doorbell made me jump.

Alex came in and gave me a big hug. Then he took a step back: 'Mama, meet Sophia'. I was surprised. She was not like his previous girlfriends. Sophia was tall and blond, wearing skin-tight jeans, a bright yellow blouse, and an expensive perfume. She came into the lounge and looked around. 'This is such a lovely flat' she said.

I hesitated. 'It is very convenient, but it is not as comfortable as our old house is it, Alex?' Alex wasn't listening. He was busy unwrapping a bunch of flowers. 'Where's the vase' he asked 'you know the one with the fluted sides'. He often made mistakes like this: looking for things that had been destroyed a decade ago now.

I smoothed my apron. It was ten years since the missile landed on our house, and ten years that I've been a widow. I still can't get the memory of that night out of my head. 'We don't have that vase anymore, but there is a grey striped one you can use at the back of the kitchen cupboard.'

They say you have to forgive to forget, but it is not in my nature. Alex was just a boy when the missile struck. Now he is a grown man with a good job and a house of his own. Sophia came into the kitchen and interrupted my train of thought. 'Anything I can do to help?' she offered. I smiled, 'No, I don't think so: I've set everything out on the table.'

I carried in the steaming bowls of bortsch. The conversation was stilted but polite. 'Alex hasn't told me much about you Sophia. Where are you from?'. Alex got in first, 'Mama, Sophia is from Klimovo - it is just a few hours from the border'. I couldn't disguise my shock. 'You are from Russia?'. 'Yes', she said, and then laughed. 'I hope you don't hold that against me'.

I didn't know what to say. How could Alex possibly have a Russian girlfriend? The Russians had killed his father, destroyed our home and torn our family apart. The peace treaty made no difference to me: someone had fired that missile and that someone was Russian. Alex reached for a piece of bread. 'Mama, Sophia is right, it is over now, and it doesn't do you any good to harbour grudges. I've told Sophia what happened to Papa. Her own father was killed in the war. We both know what it's like.'

Sophia slowly dipped the dark rye bread into her soup. She wasn't laughing now. 'What Alex says is true. My father used to launch missiles that were aimed at Kiev. He didn't have any choice. His base took a direct hit just a week before the war ended and that was it. I never saw him again'.

The new regime had been quick to reach an agreement with Ukraine after Putin's suicide and in no time at all the borders were open again. I looked across the table at Alex and Sophia, easy in each other's company and united by their shared experience of bereavement and survival.

Alex broke the silence. He stood up and cleared the bowls away – 'Ready for the next course?'. I followed him into the kitchen.

'Alex', I said, 'how could you?'. 'How could I what?' 'You know what I mean. How could you have a girlfriend from Russia'. 'Why not? She didn't start the war, she didn't kill Papa, she is innocent. We met on an international dating app. I have never found anyone like her before – she is so energetic, so full of life and such fun.'

I took the serving dishes through. Alex carried the gravy. He gave Sophia a hug as he sat down. She looked up at him, gratefully. 'Thanks Alex'.

They stayed for maybe half an hour after lunch. When they'd gone, I sat back on the sofa and imagined my future – a grandmother to half-Russian children! It was hard enough to accept that I'd grow old on my own, or that my little boy might marry, but this was worse. What if Sophia and Alex moved back to her hometown? What then? Could I bring myself to visit? It didn't bear thinking about.

Alex was not good at keeping in touch and I have learned that it is best not to bother him when he is busy at work. When he finally phoned, I forced myself to ask about Sophia. 'Oh, yes, Sophia' he said. 'We split up. We had a big row, and she went back to stay with her grandmother for a few days. Sophia's family just couldn't handle the idea that I was from Ukraine. I think that was part of the problem'.

'Oh Alex, I'm so sorry' I said, and to my surprise I meant it. 'It's ok mama' he said. 'I'm getting over it now. We had a lot in common, but I don't think we could have reconciled our differences. Sophia was certain that she didn't want children and even if we did get back together I don't think it would have lasted. It was time we both moved on, and in fact that's why I'm calling. I've had some exciting news: I've got promotion. I'm going to Moscow for a two-year posting starting in July. You must come and see me when I'm settled, it will do you the world of good.'

The trees in the park were already losing their leaves when an email arrived from Alex with something called a 'pdf' attached. I had to ask him what it was. 'It's your ticket mama, your ticket to Moscow. It's a present. I've booked a flight so you can visit me for your birthday, you can check in online, it's easy'. I was flummoxed. Me travelling by air, and checking in 'online' with nothing more than a 'pdf'? And to Russia as well!

It was different for Alex and his generation. It wasn't that they had no memory of the war, but they took it in their stride. They adapted to it like they did to everything else. Maybe that's it, I thought - we are always adjusting to events, but always in our own way. I hesitated for a few days and then made up my mind. I won't forget and I won't forgive, but if I am to see Alex then I have to go to Moscow. I packed my bag slowly and deliberately – somehow, we manage, I said to myself, somehow, we manage and somehow, we move on.

At the airport one of the other passengers showed me how to put the bar code on the reader. To my amazement the electronic gate sprang open. I stepped through.



Martha on her way to Moscow.